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John Pierce, D.D.

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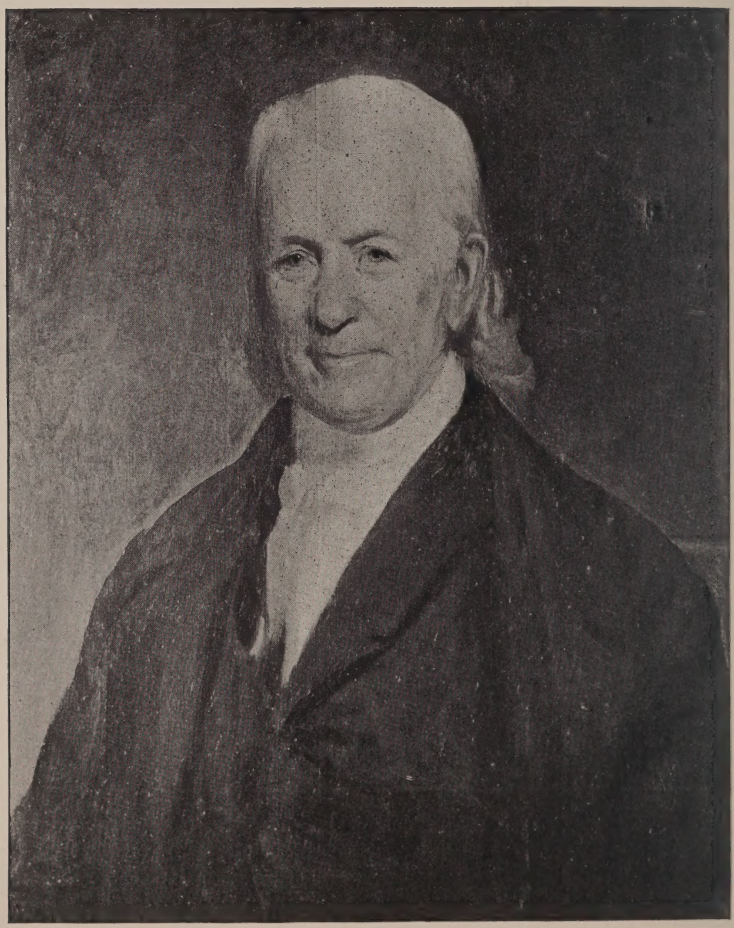
A Sermon

By William H. Lyon



JOHN PIERCE, D.D.

SIXTH MINISTER OF THE CHURCH OF CHRIST IN BROOKLINE

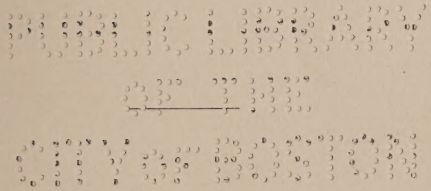
A Sermon

75-41,343

DELIVERED MARCH 14, 1897 (THE DAY PRECEDING THE ONE HUNDREDTH ANNIVERSARY OF HIS ORDINATION), IN THE FIRST PARISH CHURCH, BROOKLINE

BY

WILLIAM H. LYON



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Rev. William B. Lyon,

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SERMON.*

"According to the grace of God which is given to me, as a wise master builder, I have laid the foundation, and another buildeth thereon. But let every man take heed how he buildeth thereupon."— 1 Cor. iii. 10.†

On Monday, the 18th of January, 1847, the Rev. William S. Shailer, minister of the Baptist church of Brookline, called upon the Rev. Dr. Pierce, minister of the First Parish. There was nothing strange in this; for the two men were very intimate, and the doctor loved the young minister as his own son. But on that day Mr. Shailer had something very unusual upon his mind. He had come to propose a union of the whole town to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of Dr. Pierce's ordination. The doctor was much pleased, and referred the matter to the Parish Committee, which then

*The following sources of information have been freely used: —

The Records of the First Parish.

"Historical Sketches of Brookline," Harriet F. Woods; *Christian Inquirer*, New York, Sept. 1, 1849, article by Rev. T. B. Fox; "John Pierce," Memorial Biographies of the New England Historical and Genealogical Society, by William B. Trask, Boston, 1880; "Memoir of John Pierce, D.D.," by F. H. Hedge, in vol. i., 4th Series, Collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society.

"The Rev. John Pierce, D.D.," by the Rev. George Putnam, D.D., *Christian Examiner*, No. clvi., pp. 447–455.

"Recollections of Brookline," by Samuel Aspinwall Goddard.

"Harvard Graduates whom I have known," by A. P. Peabody, D.D., LL.D.

† The text used at the ordination by Rev. Thaddeus Mason Harris, of Dorchester.

consisted of Captain Charles Stearns, Jr., James Robinson, Abijah Warren Goddard, Charles Heath, and Captain Isaac Cook.

The Parish Committee favored the plan; and Mr. Shailer, after a lyceum lecture in the Town Hall, asked those present to remain. They also approved the project, and appointed a committee of fifteen, consisting of the Parish Committee already named, and, in addition from the First Parish, Dr. Charles Wild, Deacon Joshua Child Clark, John Howe, Benjamin Baker Davis, Captain Marshall Stearns, and George Griggs; from the Baptist church, David Richard Griggs, and Deacon Thomas Griggs; and from the Harvard Church, Samuel Craft and Otis Withington.

Appropriate services were held in the church on March 15, at half-past eleven, followed by a collation and several addresses in the Town Hall. A service of plate was presented by friends, and the ladies of the Baptist and Harvard churches delegated the little daughter of Mr. Shailer to present Dr. Pierce with a silver vase filled with flowers.

It was a very happy and appropriate occasion. There were then only three churches in the town; but they united heartily by pastors and delegates in the celebration, and thus continued and strengthened the good feeling between them out of which it sprang and which still remains. No such celebration will probably ever be held again, however long and faithful may be the service of any minister; for Dr. Pierce was the last relic of the old ecclesiastical order. The church over which he was ordained was the church of the town,

established by law, and supported by town taxes. The town-meeting and the church-meeting coöperated in his call, settlement, and support. The church was the Church of Christ in Brookline.

But, besides this historical cause for the union of the whole town in this celebration, there was a personal reason. Dr. Pierce had been not only officially, but actively, the minister of the town. He had been broad, uncontroversial, and deeply religious in his pulpit and paternal in his intercourse. The town was not large; and he had known every inhabitant, his personal and family history, his children, and his children's children.

Attached to his address at the dedication of the Town Hall in 1845 is a list of the industries of Brookline, in which, besides the hides tanned, the wagons made, and the horses kept, he counts up the tomatoes, squashes, and cherries that were produced. He could tell how many gallons of milk and how many pounds of honey had been sold. So from the plough to the death-bed the good man was the companion and sympathizer of every one in the community. He was not only the minister of the church, but the first citizen of the town. He brought back the original meaning of the word *parson:* he was the *person* of the town. As Dr. Putnam said on this very occasion, "Dr. Pierce is Brookline, and Brookline is Dr. Pierce."

Fifty years before, the Rev. Joseph Jackson, a much loved but somewhat morbid and too modest man, broken gradually down by the death of his only son, had died after a faithful ministry of thirty-six years. Careful of his charge to the last, he had even arranged

for the supply of his pulpit on the Sunday after his death. The pall-bearers took their turn in preaching, after the custom of the time; and then, at a town meeting held Aug. 29, 1796, Dr. William Aspinwall, Isaac Gardner, and David Hyslop were appointed a committee to supply the pulpit. The first regular candidate whom they presented was John Pierce, A.M., of Dorchester, then a tutor in Harvard University. The cautious church heard eighteen sermons from him, and then, on December 13, called him to its service. A week later the call was presented at town meeting for ratification; and it was voted unanimously to invite John Pierce, A.M., to be its minister. He was offered as gratuity or settlement $500, and as salary $400 and sixteen cords of wood delivered at his door. If he preferred, he could have in place of the wood $106.66⅔, which shows the price of wood in those happy days, delivered, but not cut, to have been $6.66⅔ a cord. He chose the wood, by the way. He was also to have the use of the parsonage, barn, etc. To the committee of the church the town added Stephen Sharp and Ebenezer Heath.

No doubt a full account of the life and character of the new minister had been given to both church and town. John Pierce had been born in Dorchester on July 14, 1773. His father was a much respected man, and chorister of the First Church for over forty years. His mother was a very lovely woman, who died suddenly, when only thirty-seven years of age, while John was in college. The event was a great shock to him, and from it dated his resolution to enter the ministry.

He was graduated at Harvard in 1793, standing second in his class, Charles Jackson, afterwards a well-known judge, being first. For two years he was an assistant teacher in Leicester Academy, and then began to study theology with his former pastor, Mr. Harris, of Dorchester. On the 22d of February, 1796, he was "approbated," as the old phrase was, by the Boston Association of Congregational Ministers, and gave his first sermon the next week in Mr. Harris's pulpit. For four months he was a tutor in Harvard College, having Dr. Channing and Judge Story, as they were afterwards called, among his pupils.

Such had been the history of the man to whom the call of the Church of Christ in Brookline was presented at the close of service on Sunday, Dec. 25, 1796. After considering the matter a little over five weeks, as befitted a question of so great importance, Mr. Pierce accepted the invitation on Feb. 1, 1797.

The ordination took place on Wednesday, March 15, at three o'clock in the afternoon. The moderator of the council was President Willard, of Harvard College. Among those who took part in the services were the Rev. Thaddeus Mason Harris, of Dorchester, Mr. Pierce's pastor, who gave the sermon; Dr. Peter Thacher, of Brattle Street Church, Boston; and Rev. Eliphalet Porter, of Roxbury. After the sermon and before the ordaining prayer the moderator called upon the church, who were seated in the west side gallery, to rise, and with uplifted hands to affirm that they continued of the same mind. He then summoned Mr. Pierce to renew his acceptance in the same manner.

The meeting-house in which this solemn ceremony took place was the first one, built in 1714, on land given by Mr. Caleb Gardner. Mr. Gardner himself lived between the present entrance to Mr. Kennard's estate and the present parsonage lot. Walnut Street was then the old Sherburne road, and was bordered with woods on both sides. Boylston Street and Cypress Street were still in the depths of the forest. The land which Mr. Gardner gave is now occupied by a stable and by a part of the parsonage lot. The meeting-house was originally a very plain building, 44 by 35 feet, with a gallery around three sides. There was a door at each end, and one in the centre of the long side which faced the road. There was an oak pulpit, with a great sounding-board over it and an hour-glass upon it. In 1771 the town felt rich enough to build a steeple at the west or upper end, and a fine-toned bell was given by Mr. Nicholas Boylston.

The meeting-house was placed, very properly, in the geographical centre of the town, which at the time was also the centre of the population. It long remained so. In 1820 there were 900 inhabitants in the town, of whom 456 lived above the meeting-house and 444 below. Of the 450 male inhabitants counted by the accurate doctor, 225 lived above and 225 below.

The congregation upon which Dr. Pierce looked down every Sunday was arranged, as was the custom, according to the supposed rank of its members, official or social. A committee was appointed by every church "to seat the meeting-house," as the phrase went. Whoever cares to see what this rank was in this case

should consult the account in Miss Woods's "Historical Sketches of Brookline"; and, if he can read it without a pang of pity in his heart for the brave committee who had to decide the conflicting claims, he must be callous, indeed. What would be the consequences of such a procedure in any church to-day one shudders to contemplate.

Brookline, it need hardly be said, was a very different place then from what it is now. It was, of course, beautiful. Mr. Goddard said that "the learned and faithful editor of 'Winthrop's Journal' pronounces Brookline to be the most beautiful village in New England." A certain preacher once said in the meeting-house, "I know not, my friends, how you can help being Christians; for you already live in paradise." It had been set off from Boston in 1705, in the face of great opposition and many accusations of ingratitude from the inhabitants of that sensitive town; and Miss Woods, with the lofty pride which characterizes every true son and daughter of Brookline, added that no one had been found up to the date of her writing "who regretted the separation from Boston or who desired to relinquish the liberty of an independent town." The population in 1790 was 513, and must have been less than 600 when Mr. Pierce came. He counted then "72 houses and precisely the same number of families." "Of this whole number," he adds, "but a single family professed a different faith from the rest; and this worshipped with the Baptist church in Newton."

In the year after his ordination, Oct. 31, 1798, Mr. Pierce was married to Miss Lovell, of Medway, one of

his former pupils at Leicester. She died July 2, 1800, and was followed two years later by her infant son. On May 6, 1802, he was married to Miss Lucy Tappan, of Northampton, who survived him, much beloved by all who knew her. They had ten children, of whom two survive: one living in Dorchester, the widow of Rev. Thomas B. Fox; the other, the wife of Mr. Henry V. Poor, being still an inhabitant of Brookline. During the whole of his ministry Mr. Pierce lived in the parsonage, which had been built in 1781, on the site of the present parsonage. It was sold in 1856, when the present house was built for Dr. Hedge, and was removed to the corner of Chestnut Street and Chestnut Place, where it still stands.

Under the new minister the church grew fast. A number of families removed to Brookline from Dorchester to be near one whom they loved and honored. The population of the town increased from normal causes also, and the old meeting-house was found too small for its congregation. The first plan was to build one on the same site; but at length a new place was chosen, about where the present building stands. Here in April, 1805, the corner-stone of a new and larger house was built, with a spacious porch in front and a steeple one hundred and thirty-seven feet high rising over it, a mark to all the country around. The needs of a tenderer generation were consulted in the addition of two square box-stoves for wood fires. The Hon. Stephen Higginson gave a bell weighing a thousand pounds, which is still rung by order of the town at seven, twelve, and nine o'clock. Mr. John Lucas, who

lived opposite the reservoir, gave $400, which was spent for a clock that still holds up its warning hands to the preacher. Mr. Richard Sullivan, who then lived on the place later known as the Bowditch estate, gave the stone steps. Mr. Thomas Walley gave the Bible from which I have just read, and Mr. David Hyslop a baptismal basin.

Of the original church there remains, as far as I know, only one relic, the pulpit, which has been preserved in the parsonage. When I took tea with Dr. Hedge in 1874, he called my attention to a beautiful crab-apple tree in full blossom, which could be seen from the window. When I came into the parsonage last year, I looked for the tree again; but it had disappeared. It stood, I am now told, before the front door of the old church, and must have been, when I saw it, at least seventy years old.

The communion plate of the old church is still preserved. The largest flagon, given by Mrs. Ann White, bears no date, but must belong to this time. The next largest was given by Edward Devotion in 1744. The third in size came from Mrs. Susanna Sharp in 1770, and the other from Miss Mary Allin in 1750. The two smallest cups are dated 1770, one the gift of Mrs. Mary Woodward, the other of an unknown donor. The two cups next larger came from William Hyslop in 1792. The four largest cups and the two plates are of later date, and were given while the church occupied the second house.

So a new and prosperous life went on in the new building. One searches the records in vain for very

striking events. "Blessed is the church as well as the land that has no history." The most interesting feature is the occasional meetings of the church to hear the letter missive from some sister church desiring aid in ordaining a new minister or dismissing one already in its service. One can almost trace the history of the liberal churches by these quiet entries. At first the names are unfamiliar, the names of ministers so long dead that but few are generally remembered. But gradually, as one penetrates this century, one recognizes names that stir the blood. In 1805, for instance, the church is asked to aid in the ordination of Joseph Stevens Buckminster as minister of the Brattle Street Church. Soon after Charles Lowell must be helped into the pulpit of the West Church. Then James Walker and John Gorham Palfrey are to be ordained. Then sturdy John Pierpont strides across the page. So the devoted Samuel J. May, the ill-fated George Ripley, and the eloquent George Putnam come and go; while Theodore Parker and Frederic, now Bishop, Huntington, start upon paths that were so widely to separate.

The most important event in this quiet pastorate was one of great significance in the ecclesiastical history of Massachusetts, and, indeed, of New England. I mean the disestablishment of the Congregational Church.

As I have already said, the Church of Christ in Brookline, like the other Congregational churches of the State, was the legal church of the town. As Dr. Hedge put it, "there was but 'one fold and one shep-

herd' in the town." The Congregational churches of New England held very much the same position as the Anglican churches in Old England. They were as truly institutions of the town as the schools, supported by taxes and regulated to some extent by the town meeting. Of late years there had been a modification of the law of taxes, allowing those who contributed to the support of other churches than the Congregational to be excused from supporting the standing order. Under this law, Baptist, Methodist, and other societies had sprung up, the Congregational still remaining the established church, and enjoying the social prestige and pecuniary advantages of that position.

Owing, however, to the increase of dissenters and of those who cared for no church, as well as to the changed ideas of the proper relations of Church and State, Article III. of the State Constitution was abolished in 1833; and the Congregational churches were, so to speak, reduced to the ranks, standing before the law on a level with the other sects who had come to share the prosperity of the Puritan settlement. The Church of Christ in Brookline became the First Parish in Brookline, and so continues to-day.

Dr. Pierce, therefore, ceased to be the legal minister of the town, and became only the minister of one church. But the mental habits of thirty-six years were not easily changed, either in people or in minister; and Dr. Pierce, as we have seen, held his position as first in the hearts of his fellow-townsmen. The jubilee, however, had reminded him that he was growing old. He showed no signs of decay, but felt that a

younger hand must be placed beside his own on the helm; and, in accordance with his wish, it was decided to settle a colleague. On Aug. 10, 1847, Frederic N. Knapp, a recent graduate of Harvard Divinity School, was called through a committee, consisting of Dr. Charles Wild, Mr. Benjamin Guild, and Mr. John E. Thayer. He accepted, and was ordained October 6.

The new order of things which was coming in, and of which the events just narrated were parts, led to the erection of a new building. The old-fashioned meeting-house, closely resembling the one still standing in Roxbury, was taken down; and a picturesque but smaller Gothic church was dedicated in its place on Dec. 1, 1848. The pulpit of this church is still used in our chapel; and the Bible given by Mrs. William H. Elliot is preserved there.

Dr. Pierce did not long survive the old meeting-house in which almost all his preaching had been done. He continued to officiate at times in his own church and elsewhere; but in March, 1849, only four months after the dedication of the new building, he was taken ill. He lingered for some months. In August a new organ was dedicated in the new church, and the musical minister was carried in his chair to hear it. He took part in the services, excusing himself from keeping his seat on the ground "of not belonging any more to the rising generation." In less than a week, Aug. 24, 1849, he was dead. He was buried in the Brookline cemetery; and the white marble monument which one sees over the wall was inscribed with the motto which he had chosen, "Christ is my hope."

Few men could have been missed from the town as much as Dr. Pierce was. He was very striking in his personal appearance, about six feet tall, well-proportioned, and erect, with long-flowing hair, which had begun to change while he was yet in college, and was already snowy white in middle life. He had been exceptionally healthy through his whole life, losing only fifteen Sundays from his pulpit in his fifty years. He rose very early; before sunrise his axe was busy upon his woodpile in winter, and his spade in his garden in summer. He walked a great deal and long distances.

He was very fond of music, passionately fond of sacred music. He had a strong bass voice, led the singing in his own church, and, in fact, wherever he went. Mr. W. H. Baldwin, in his farewell address in the old Brighton meeting-house, recalls Dr. Pierce as one of the exchanges, and adds that he "was always furnished with a copy of the singing-book, the leader of the choir announcing to him in a loud voice the page and the number of the tune to be sung. He would always sing the hymn, and with great fervor."* For fifty-four years in succession he "set the tune" of "St.

*"He had in him the making of a world-famous singer. His voice was at once strong and sweet. At church and in all the churches in which he preached, he stood, while till of late years the congregation sat, during the singing, and sang 'with the spirit and with the understanding also,' with might and main, beating time with his heavy hand. He knew the best tunes of every choir in his range of pulpit exchanges, and there were certain hymns associated with special tunes which he always brought into use in particular churches. Thus in the Beverly church, where he preached as often as once a year, he always gave out the hymn commencing,

'Upward I lift mine eyes,'

for which he expected the grand old tune of 'Triumph'; and that tune with his energetic aid in swelling the chorus was the musical pride and glory of the year."—*A. P. Peabody.*

Martin's" * at the Commencement dinner at Harvard. After conducting two services, he would sing all the evening at the parsonage with his friends. Once a month he walked over to Dorchester to see his father, and with him, who was as enthusiastic as himself, passed a long time in still singing hymns.†

He was a lover of children, and much beloved and followed by them. He had a great fund of stories for them, and they learned verses of Scripture and hymns to repeat to him. Once a month all the children in the town came to him to repeat the catechism, and received at Thanksgiving time each a little book. He served upon the School Committee during his entire ministry, and loved his work there greatly. He was deeply interested in the welfare of Harvard College. When a boy, he walked from Dorchester to Cambridge to see the buildings, and looked at them for a long

* "Which, though he has had two able and skilled successors, has to the older graduates never sounded like itself since he died. Once, perhaps oftener, he performed the same service at another college. I was present with him at a Bowdoin Commencement. Our psalm had been adopted. A painfully diffident minister then settled at Brunswick was called upon, unexpectedly, I suppose, to 'set the tune.' In his confusion, he started 'Old Hundred,' which is of the wrong metre. Dr. Pierce was equal to the occasion. Before the leader's trembling voice had reached the middle of the first line, the doctor interposed, saying, '"Old Hundred" is a long-metre tune: you want "St. Martin's."' And he recommenced the verse to the right tune, and under his powerful leading, the psalm was probably sung to more effect than ever before or since."—*A. P. Peabody*, p. 32.

† "There were certain persons, to or with whom he gave to a specific hymn-singing the sanctity of a religious rite. Thus for many years he paid at Newburyport an annual visit to Paul Couch, a bed-ridden invalid, who, having prepared himself for the ministry of the gospel, exercised it only from the bed or chamber of chronic infirmity, and so exercised it that his room became a Mecca for saintly pilgrimage, a centre of holy influence, a bureau of charity. At this yearly visit Dr. Pierce and Mr. Couch always sang together, to a strange old fuguing tune, the hymn commencing,—

'Through all the changing scenes of life,
In trouble and in joy.'"

—*A. P. Peabody*, p. 33.

time with vague longings. He missed only one Commencement, and has recorded in his diary his recollections of all he attended. The Historical Society published these notes. He was for thirty-three years the Secretary of the Board of Overseers, a member *ex officio* for fifty-two years, and received the degree of D.D. in 1822.

He was a man of method. His hours were fixed and kept. He was scrupulously punctual. If he met any one in the street as he was on his way to a place he had intended to reach at a certain time, he took out his watch, and allowed himself only just the time he could spare with him. "I never intend to be more than three-quarters of a second behind the time," he used to say. In fact, the same wit of his day who described the arrival of various ministers in heaven — one of the Boston pastors, for instance, putting up his glasses, looking critically around upon the heavenly hosts, and remarking that it was rather a miscellaneous company — pictured Dr. Pierce as walking briskly up the golden street, watch in hand, and informing the assemblage that he had been just nineteen minutes and fifteen seconds in getting there.

This leads us to one of his most marked characteristics,— his love of statistics. His favorite parts of the Bible must have been the Epistles of Saint John, because they had so much to say of love, and the Book of Numbers. He timed and numbered everything and everybody. He could tell you how long every sermon and prayer had been. "He was easily moved to tears," said a friend, "and did not hide them; but,

while they were raining down his cheeks at the moving close of an eloquent discourse, he would take out his great silver watch, and say in broken accents to the person sitting nearest him, 'Just fifty minutes,' or 'Ten minutes over the hour.'"

He knew the date of graduation of every acquaintance of his who had ever been to college. At each of the sixty-three Commencements of Harvard College which he attended he recorded the number of graduates on the catalogue before his own name and the number after it. It is pathetic reading,— the annual decrease of the older graduates and the increase of the younger. At last, in 1847, there were but twenty-one in the long list whose graduation he had not witnessed; and then the good old man, pencil in hand, as it were, himself dropped out of the procession. We owe to this taste of his and to his marvellous memory a great many valuable facts and statistics. People deferred to him as to a dictionary or almanac. Once, when there was a question as to where a certain man was born, Judge Davis said: "Ask Dr. Pierce. If he does not know, the man was not born anywhere."

One of his habits, which may also prove of value some day, the result of which is sure to be at least interesting, not to say piquant, was his practice of keeping a diary. Into this went everything that had happened or of which he was thinking. In the possession of the Massachusetts Historical Society are eighteen volumes of bound manuscript, small parts of which have been published in the society's magazine, carefully edited, but most of which is sealed from all

readers. In fact, Dr. Pierce provided that it should not be made public till after the death of all his children. There can be nothing uncharitable there. It was simply the mirror of his daily experience and thinking, but it is sometimes fortunate that the truth *is* at the bottom of a well.

Few ministers have ever been more beloved than Dr. Pierce was. His long ministry had given time for many to know him, and his prominence had lifted him where many could see him constantly. Dr. Putnam said, "We suppose that there was hardly a man in Massachusetts whose person was known to so many individuals in the State." The most unselfish and unworldly of men, the most devoted of pastors, and fixing his eyes upon a high ideal of the minister's office, he drew the hearts of all to him, and kept them close. As one hears or reads of his great popularity and considers its causes, one recalls that fine passage in Ian Maclaren's "Cure of Souls" about the good pastor: "To his own people their minister is the ablest preacher they have ever heard, and the most eloquent. People of other churches with eminent divines are amazed, and smile at this fond imagination. Yes, because he was not their minister. But his people read in between the lines,— his visits in sickness, his sympathy in trial, his endless kindnesses to them and theirs. They edit his sermon, sitting in their pews, with the foot-notes that by and by eclipse the original. The people are fairly overcome by his lovely illustrations, his deep arguments, his moving appeals; but he did not write them last week. They are deeds,— ten, twenty, thirty years old."

In his theology Dr. Pierce was very broad and undogmatic, never preaching a controversial sermon, and regretting the schism in the Congregational body, which occurred during his pastorate. He never forgot that his church bore no sectarian name, but was at first "The Church of Christ in Brookline" and later "The First Parish in Brookline." Circumstances landed him in one of the two parties; but he kept his respect for the other, and, as far as possible, his companionship with its ministers. One is not surprised to learn that during his last illness he recorded with mathematical gratitude that one hundred and twenty-seven ministers had called upon him, belonging to seven different denominations; nor to read, at the close of the Convention Sermon, which was preached that year by that frank and sturdy champion of the sterner theology, Rev. Nehemiah Adams, of Boston, these affectionate words: "May it be the peculiar happiness of those who have known each other here as ministers, in joys and sorrows, in counsel or in controversy, to meet in heaven! Some will be there whom we may not expect to see, and some will fail whose absence will astonish us. May we meet there our beloved and venerable friend, whose presence and voice we miss to-day, but who will always be pleasantly associated in our minds with this convention! His face is a benediction."

It is good to have taken one more glance in these changed surroundings and in so different times at that serene and venerable figure. The last glimpse we get of Saint John is while he is reclining at Ephesus in his old age, surrounded by his disciples, and saying to

them as long as his breath lasted, "Little children, love one another." Our old pastor was the Saint John of this community, and it remembers him best in the spirit of that last sentence of his last published sermon: "After all the clamor that has been made about notions and forms, he who teaches and practises love best shall be greatest in the kingdom of heaven."